

3: Fiery Fingers

"The spirit of fire is fierce, whether the fire be small or big;
and so it is with battles **Puppet Shows**."
- Miyamoto Musashi

This chapter explains how to move your fingers to perform different Moves. Moves are specific motions that help the audience to understand what the puppet is thinking, feeling, and supports the illusion that the puppet is alive. Each Move begins from a Stance, continues into a recognizable middle, and then either returns to a Stance or goes on into the next movement in an action chain.

Chaining Moves together is a good way to draw the audience's focus as one puppet speaks or emotes, but each gesture must not blur into the next. If you commit to a specific movement, you must remember to do the beginning, middle, and end of that motion. Give each Move the time it needs to be extremely clear.

“American puppetry is too muddy”

- my puppetry mentor and former National Treasure of China, Hua Hua Zhang

‘Muddy’ is what we call a string of unrelated actions with no clarity. If you begin an action chain, you must understand how each Move supports what is being communicated to the audience. How does each Move look from the audience’s perspective? A single clear movement is far superior to a series of loose, wiggly motions. Children move a puppet without thinking - professionals communicate with clarity.

‘Puppet Time’

Some puppeteers cover up their lack of skill with fast movements. A poorly defined Move executed at high speed can seem exciting to the audience. This philosophy of “speed over quality” has been used in gimmicky puppet shows but should not be viewed as something to strive for. Instead, a good rule is that slow movements can be more beautiful. In a puppet show the rules of gravity and time do not necessarily apply. To emphasize a movement and make it more interesting, more beautiful or more intricate, slow down time and take however long you need to complete it. Use this sparingly or else your audience will get bored.

STOP

To emphasize a Move even further, just stop. Stop all movement, action, everything - stay frozen and let the moment breathe. This will help the audience process what they have just seen. Sometimes, characters on stage need not necessarily be frozen in time, they could be watching, breathing, doing everything but moving. A good rule for using STOP is to figure out if a scene is pure movement and dialog. If there are no breaks in the action, if characters are either speaking or moving without any pause, that is a good indicator to find some places to STOP. Also, the characters should always take time to think about what they are going to do next before they initiate movement.

Jab, Strong, Fierce

Just as each Move has a beginning, middle and end, they can be performed with three levels of intensity - Jab, Strong, or Fierce. Jab is a weak or gentle motion, quickly done and only the puppet’s arm moves. Strong moves the body slightly with its decisive and slower movement. Fierce is a huge exaggerated movement where the puppet’s entire body participates - the biggest, grandest motion possible.

Go Back to Go Forward

A general rule for any movement is to always move backward before you move forward. That applies to walks, arm movements, breaths, and others. It can be as simple as a quick, short, almost unseen motion back before going ahead with a Move. If you are doing a Fierce Move, the initial backward movement should mirror the intensity of what’s to come. The more emphasis you put on moving backward first, the more the audience will feel the significance of the motion.

The Three Most Common Moves

Most of the non-specific gestures you will see in a hand puppet show fall under three categories. They can be performed in any direction, but the overall movement must be the same.

A Poke starts from the Draw Back stance. The puppet's arm extends straight out in a direction until it cannot go any further, then retreats back from whence it came. This is generally used to point, indicate, or punch.

The Chop is similar in its utility to point or emphasize a line, to indicate or to attack. Instead of the puppet's arm extending straight out, it starts by facing in a direction (usually up) and following a circular motion to its desired end point, then retracting the same way as a Poke. The Chop should always be a quarter circle. This can be used in any direction from any stance.

Finally, the Sweep can be used to indicate a vague notion or to address multiple things at once. It is a 360 degree circular motion that starts from any stance.

Poke

Let's break the Poke down into its most mechanical form. To produce this most basic gesture you must move your fingers not once but four different times. Start at Neutral stance, move to Draw Back stance, then Poke out with a puppet arm, then back to Draw Back, finally back to Neutral. Practice this while counting to four, over and over.

Photo of a Poke (action indicated with arrows)

Chop

Photo of Chop (movement indicated by arrows)

Sweep

Photo of Sweep (movement indicated by arrows)

Uncommon Moves

When not gesturing or pointing, hand puppets have a wide array of Moves at their fingertips (pun intended). There are more that exist than what are described below, you should always seek to discover more interesting ways of moving in every performance.

Wave

Clapping

Come Here

Draw a Shape

Flex

Air Quotes

Cover Part of Face

Shrug

Pray

Think

“In puppetry, the whole body of the puppet is involved, his movements exaggerated. He is literally wrenched by emotion.”

- Paul Vincent Davis

Emotions

Conveying emotion without speaking is one of the main goals of puppet theater. A puppet can literally speak “I AM HAPPY” but it can also convey this by looking slightly up and bouncing around a little bit, by having an excited energy to their movements, by clapping and moving faster. Visual language is always the more powerful way to connect to the audience, as puppetry is an innately visual medium.

The Hua Hua Method

To discover new choreography for her puppet characters, Hua Hua Zhang would put herself (her whole body) in the puppet's place and talk out the character's inner monolog while running through the scene. She would use exaggerated pantomime movements and utilize the entire stage. Then she would run the scene again without dialog, carefully noting the major emotions, movements and locations of her character. Finally, she would apply these discoveries to her puppet character and perform the scene with puppets, eventually using the scene's real dialog atop her new choreography. In this way, she created excellent movements that felt natural and expertly conveyed her character's thoughts and emotions.

Below are some Moves that are universally recognized as specific emotions by audiences around the world. There are more to discover and some cannot be easily described here, such as Shyness or Disgust.

Happy

Sad

Stress / Anxiety

Surprise

Fear

Anger